

The Spanish River Papers

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OLD CITY HALL, HOME OF BOCA RATON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Jeanne Nixon Baur, Artist

A report to the membership of

Boca Raton Historical Society, Inc.

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HARLEY D. GATES: BOCA RATON HISTORIAN

Harley D. Gates, a pioneer resident of Boca Raton, first came to Florida in 1907 on a business trip. Back home in Rutland, Vermont, where he was with a real estate firm, he remembered Florida when winter snows blanketed his native New England. Returning south in 1913, he purchased a five acre homesite on what would become Palmetto Park Road at the Intra-Coastal Waterway for 225 dollars. In 1914 he built what he called a West Indian style bungalow with porches on all sides for his new wife Harriet. The entire cost of the concrete block structure was only 3,500 dollars. In 1923, at the beginning of the Florida land boom, he sold the house for 10,000 dollars to Stanley Harris of Vancouver. Harris added a tower and garages, painted the house pink, and named it Casa Rosa. The Casa Rosa remained as a Boca Raton landmark until 1966 when it was razed to build a restaurant.

Gates continued in the real estate business in Florida and became an active land developer during the land boom with projects along the coast from Miami to West Palm Beach. He was also involved in the development of Boca Raton and became a shareholder in the Mizner Development Corporation.

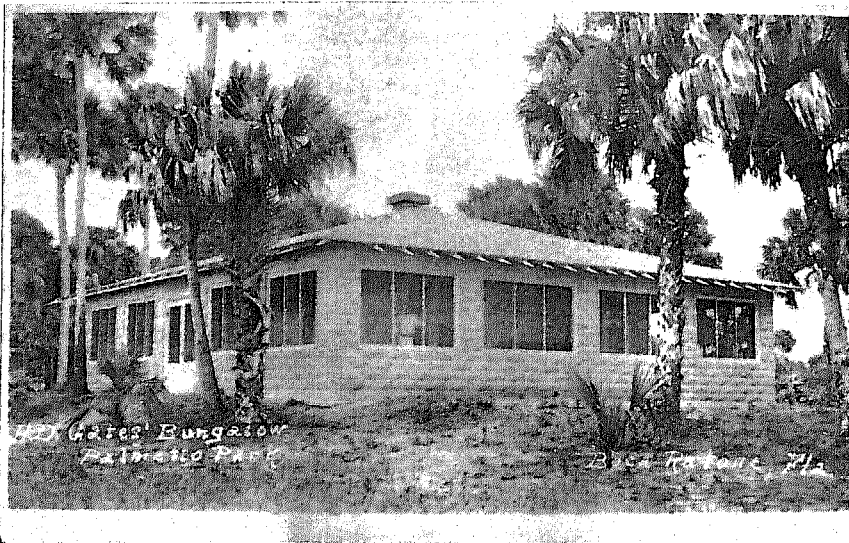
In the 1950s Gates began writing short histories of the early years of Boca Raton which he published himself in booklet form. The most ambitious, "Boca Raton, Florida: A Romance of the Past and a Vision of the Future," published in 1956, has been seen as almost a primary source on early city history. Other booklets, "Pioneer Days at Boca Raton" and "Boca Raton, A Romance of the Past," have long been found in local history collections. Only recently has an additional Gates booklet been discovered. This short history, "Reminiscences of A Pioneer," has been reproduced and forms the basis of this issue of the Spanish River Papers. Included also are a few pages from the larger work discussing Boca Raton real estate development. The booklets and the photographs are from the collections of the Society.

Donald W. Curl,
Editor

Harley D. Gates. Photograph from the late 1950s, early 1960s. Mr. Gates died in September 1965.



Mr. Gates' Home before the bridge was built.



Gates' Bungalow
Palmetto Park
B. Gateshouse Fla.

Reminiscences of A Pioneer

By HARLEY D. GATES



Two views of the Gates's house before remodeling. Written on the margin of the post card is "Mr Gates Home before the bridge was built."

REMINISCENCES OF A PIONEER

By HARLEY D. GATES

My initial introduction to Boca Raton was so impressive that I purchased five acres of land with 330 feet on the inland waterway. The purchase price for the entire tract was \$225.00, and my tax bill for the first year was 51c. A few days later I made arrangement to have half an acre cleared and a dozen citrus trees planted.

In the Spring of 1914 I had built a West Indian bungalow with porch on all sides at a cost of \$3,500.00, camping while it was being completed. The workmen drove from Delray each Monday morning and returned home on Saturday evening. They stayed in an abandoned building on Royal Palm Road. In 1924 a tower was added to the bungalow and a garage attached to the rear. The building at that time was painted pink and named Casa Rosa. In 1916 I purchased 26 acres of land adjoining on the South. Our place was known as Palmetto Park Plantation, and the street received its name, Palmetto Park Road, from our estate. Royal Palm Road was so named from four large Royal Palms growing on the canal bank opposite the end of that street.

Boca Raton, in those early years, offered a large variety of tropical trees and rare plants. It was a beauty spot divinely planned. The tall Palmetto Palms, Coconut Palms, and native Rubber Trees growing on the East side of the waterway gave the scene a weird attractiveness. Much of the growth between the ocean and waterway was of West Indian origin. The massive oaks scattered through the jungle were covered with air plants, orchids, resurrection plants and Spanish moss. They were true aerial gardens. Among the profuse growth were coco plums, both white and purple, magnolia bay, wild persimmons, lancewood, gumbo limbo, paradise trees, and many other interesting

plants. Near the beach were numerous sea grapes and several seven-year apple trees. It is said that this unusual fruit took seven years to ripen. I believe this was true, as I never saw a fruit that was ripe or fit to eat. Many of the large coconut palms now on our old estate grew from nuts picked up on the beach and planted here.

At the lower end of Lake Boca Raton, now the location of Boca Raton Estates, was a small creek running back into the jungle for a distance of half a mile. Trees and vines overhanging the water made it an alluring picture. Large white herons, egrets, marsh hens and shore birds of many kinds added to the fanciful setting. Here it was that many times I drifted in my small duck boat for pleasant fishing hours.

At the North end of Lake Boca Raton was an island of about two acres in circumference. This was known as Coconut Island as there were several large coconut palms growing on it.

On the beach where the blue ocean broke in a rumbling surf could be found all kinds of shells, sea beans, ivory nuts, sea fans, the shiny seed of the mammee sapota, sea biscuits, sponges, corals, sea feathers, and many interesting and fascinating curiosities. Pink conchs were abundant and the large Bahama starfish often could be picked up. The inner reefs were the marine gardens supplying the mysteries of the sea.

The first settlers lived mostly on the available foods at hand. We grew potatoes, both Irish and sweet, and vegetables of many kinds. Among the vegetables in our garden, little known at that time, were winter squash, Brussels sprouts, head lettuce, and red cabbage.

Among the early fruits the guava held first place. They were made into jelly, cooked and canned like peaches, and used for pies. The coco plum made a preserve, and

sea grapes a wonderful jelly. The Mastic grew in the jungle and its small yellow fruit were liked by many of the natives. Mulberries and huckleberries were canned and made into pies. The pond apples, or alligator apple as it was sometimes called, grew on the banks of the waterways and was frequently eaten by the colored folks. They were very fragrant and one would scent an entire room. Having a strong turpentine flavor, they were not particularly tasty. The Orinoco banana, often called the "horse banana", was a variety of plantain and excellent when baked.

Most of the mangoes were of the turpentine variety and cooked while green made good sauce and pies. The Indian pumpkins were small, green and good in flavor. The Seminole Indians were very fond of them. The palmetto bud made a good salad and was cooked in milk like asparagus. The coconut palm also had an edible bud but removing the bud killed the tree so they were seldom used.

Game was plentiful. During the fall and winter months Lake Wyman and Lake Boca Raton were alive with ducks and other wild fowl. On the prairie west of the town were flocks of doves and covies of quail. Deer and wild turkey were to be found in the back country. During the spring and summer months the huge sea turtles came ashore to lay their eggs and were often caught and used as a substitute for beef. Turtle eggs made a famous omelet and could be used for cooking. I recall one night when a large trunk-back turtle, weighing from 1200 to 1500 pounds, came ashore and with the aid of two colored boys, we turned it over. One of my neighbors came to the beach and reached over and felt of the turtle. Almost instantly, a large flipper shot out and knocked him for some distance away. Thereafter he viewed the turtle from a safe point.

Farming was the principal means of making a living

during my early years at Boca Raton. Most of the farms were small and usually from five to twenty acres. The main crops grown were green beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, egg plant and peppers. Boca bore a reputation in the northern markets for the high quality of the peppers grown here.

Colored help was plentiful and mostly came from Deerfield. They would walk over in the early morning, work ten hours and walk home at night. They were paid from 75c to \$1.00 a day.

When I lived alone before Mrs. Gates came down in the Spring of 1915, I employed an old colored man to work around the yard, and to cook for me. He had formerly been a cook on a boat from Liverpool to Australia, and was an excellent chef. He knew all about cooking native fish and fowl. On my first Thanksgiving he cooked a wild turkey I had shot the day before, and I had as my dinner guests two gentlemen from Illinois, who were stopping at the Australian Hotel in Deerfield. It was strictly a Florida dinner and much enjoyed by my guests.

During those early years in Boca Raton the county roads were nine feet wide and paved with native rock. During dry weather they were extremely dry and dusty. The shoulders of the roads were mostly sand, and if we wished to go to Ft. Lauderdale or points south, it was wise to carry a shovel and a couple of planks about five feet long. A truck would of necessity, force a smaller car off the road into the sand, and to get back on the hard surface, we used the shovel and planks.

Gasoline was brought from Miami by boat and delivered to the dock in 50 gallon drums at 9c a gallon. Kerosene was used for cooking and lighting and cost 6½c a gallon delivered. Fishermen stopped frequently to get a gallon of gasoline to enable them to reach the Hillsboro

Fishing Camp. They seldom had money, but in passing our place, left us fish, oysters, ducks and crawfish. The gasoline was usually with water and other impurities and had to be strained through a chamois.

Tires for our car were good for 3,500 to 4,000 miles, and oil lamps furnished light for night driving before the Prestolite and electricity came into use.

The freight station was on the railroad right of way near Palmetto Park Road crossing, and just East of the station was the Post Office and commissary where a few staple groceries might be purchased. It consisted of a one room frame building. Our first grocery store was built on the old Dixie Highway west of the railroad in 1916.

Our school in those days was West of the railroad, a one-story frame building. The present school was built in 1916 at a cost of \$20,000. The three acres on which it stands was purchased for \$300.00. The new building was an ideal place for meetings of all kinds, including political rallies.

Our ice came from West Palm Beach by freight wrapped in sawdust and burlap.

In pioneer days we had no "bulldozers" for clearing of land and all clearing was done by colored men with grub hoes. They were paid by the "task", and a task was 45 feet square; 21 tasks made an acre.

In 1914 there were 23 Japanese families in a colony in the north part of Boca Raton known as Yamato, about two miles from the center of town. They were brought here by an educated Jap named Joseph Saki. Saki died shortly after I came to Boca Raton, and after a time dissatisfaction broke out in the colony and now only one of the original group is left.

Several of my neighbors had small pineapple patches

and there were larger fields between here and Delray. Pineapples were picked while green for shipment and ripe fruit could be had for the asking. As one packing house manager told me "The more you carry away, the fewer I will have to bury." There was no market for ripe pineapples.

In those early times Boca Raton had two groves. One was on the ridge in the west part of the town, and was planted by Henry Flagler. It was known as Sunset Hill Grove. The other was just East of the Dixie Highway and owned by J. E. Ingraham, Vice-President of the Florida East Coast Railroad. The Ingraham grove was purchased in 1923 by the Boca Raton Land Co., and divided into lots. The best lots were sold with bearing fruit trees on them. The Sunset Hill Grove is now a part of Africa, U. S. A.

There was a moving picture at Delray, and often Boca Raton residents would drive up there for an evening's entertainment. The picture machine would occasionally break down and require lengthy repairs, but we expected these delays and were quite patient.

Dances were held in Long's packing house every week or two, music being furnished by a violin. The Australian Hotel in Deerfield served excellent dinners for 50c each, and many Sundays we went over there for one of their meals. Food was served help yourself style and was abundant at all times.

There was an Indian mound in the jungle at the lower end of Lake Boca Raton where we found the bones of several Indians. According to the Smithsonian Institute the mound was built by Indians who inhabited Florida prior to the coming of Columbus. There was a shell mound just South of where the Lost City is now located. The shell from this mound was entirely removed for building roads.

While building my home I was warned that rattlesnakes were quite plentiful, but that a rattlesnake would not come around where there was a black snake. A black snake about five feet long appeared at the back door one morning and I gave him a little dish of milk which he seemed to enjoy. Thereafter he appeared frequently and I always gave him bread and milk. One afternoon we witnessed a battle between this blacksnake and a big brown snake known as a "coach whip". The blacksnake finally won by squeezing the other to death, and we gave the vanquished a fitting burial.

In a lagoon near our estate was the home of a large alligator. We often heard him calling at night. Alligators were also seen when rowing up the canal and would frequently slip into the water from the muddy banks.

Mail came once a day and, in 1915 we had a telephone connection with Delray. The subscribers paid for the extension of the line from Delray in addition to the regular service charge. Until the Boca Raton Water & Light Co. built its water plant that year, we had our water from a well piped by gasoline engine into a galvanized tank with a line running to the house.

In 1915 our first Board of Trade was organized with seven directors. The writer is the only surviving member of this board. Many of our early improvements can be traced to the activities of this organization.

There were many remarkable stories and legends told to me about Boca Raton. One that I can vouch for as true, although I was never able to solve the mystery. On a dark night one could see a bright light floating out over the ocean about a mile North of our present pavilion. This light was over the wreck of an old ship on a reef in about twenty feet of water. The light would disappear when one came almost opposite the place. I tried many times to solve the mystery, but was never able to do so. After the

hurricane in 1926 the light was seen no more. Superstitious people said it was to guide navigation away from the rocky reef on which the old ship was wrecked.

About fifty years ago an old fisherman told his friend that while strolling along the beach he encountered a lady dressed in black walking close to the water edge. Neither spoke and went their separate ways without apparent recognition. Some days later the body of a woman was washed ashore on the beach. Her clothing bore no means of identification and all efforts to learn her identity proved futile. She was buried on the ridge by the few people living here at the time. When the fisherman learned of the finding of the dead woman he maintained complete silence fearing that he might in some way be connected with her death, although it was conceded that she was drowned. When I came here there was a large wooden cross on the ocean ridge South of where the pavilion now stands, marking the silent grave of the unknown.

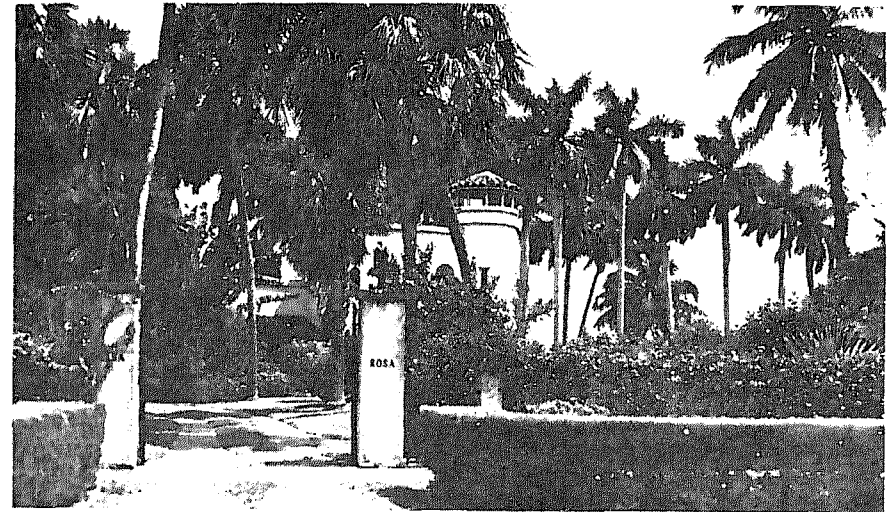
The first year I was in Boca Raton a small yacht anchored at the inlet and two well dressed men, accompanied by three rough looking characters, formed the crew. After much measuring and locating with the aid of an old map, they started digging on the ridge just north of the inlet. No one knew who they were or what they sought, but they left half a dozen large holes from ten to fifteen feet deep within a radius of 150 feet. One morning they raised anchor and left without divulging their secret.

Over forty years ago a party of Boca Raton farmers located the wreck of an old ship buried twenty feet below the surface at a point 150 feet west from the inlet. They hired a dredge and proceeded to dig at a cost of several thousand dollars. The water level was soon reached and it was necessary to build a coffer-dam and keep a pump going day and night. Finally, the water came in faster

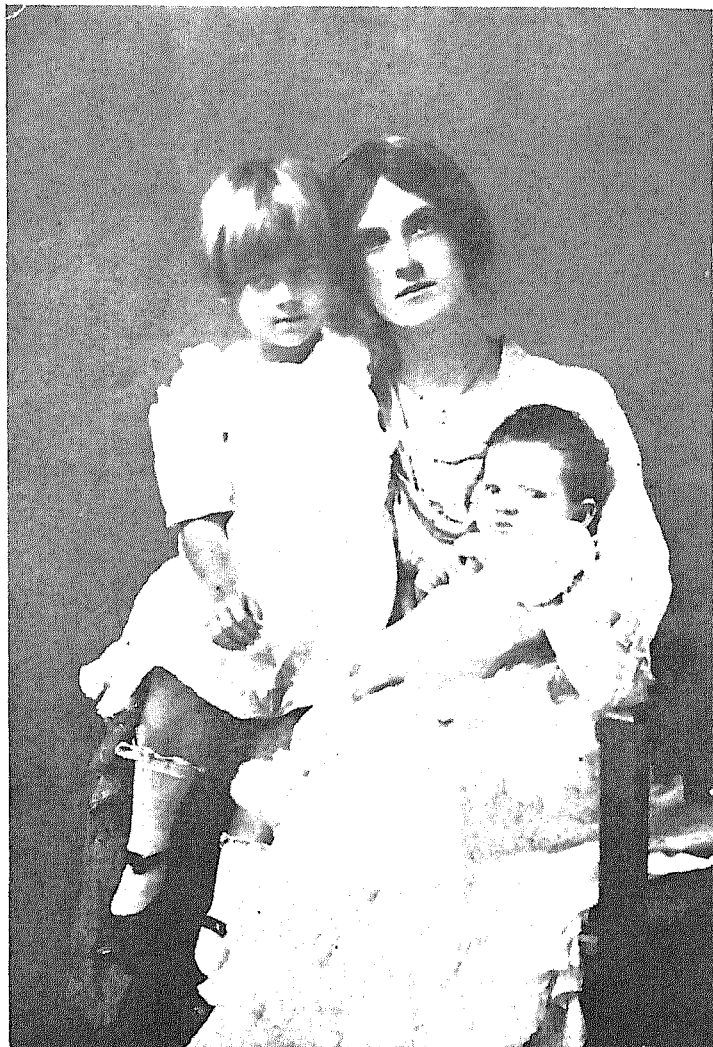
than it could be pumped out and a diver was employed to go down and explore the wreck. If any treasure was found there was no conclusive evidence of it and the farmers were back planting beans the next fall. One thing was proven, however, that many of our old maps were correct, and that 300 years ago much of the land around the inlet was then under water. Otherwise, this old ship could never have reached a point so far inland.

During the winter of 1914 an auction was held of lots along Palmetto Park Road. Prospective purchasers were brought from West Palm Beach by excursion boat and lots sold at prices ranging from \$29 to \$100 each. I had 24 lots in the same location which I sold at private sale to northern clients at \$100 each. Today these lots are held at \$12,000 to \$15,000 each. The Wavecrest Subdivision with ocean front lots was placed on the market in February 1917. These lots were offered at \$10 a front foot. Lots facing the inland waterway were sold in 1914 and 1915 at \$500 for 95 foot lots. I have refrained from saying anything about real estate developments of the period from 1920 to 1926, as much of this information was given in my earlier publication, Boca Ratone, "A Romance of the Past, A Vision of the Future".

We could not wish to have the old days back with their lack of material convenience, yet time has a beguiling way of making us forget the difficulties and remember only the pleasant things. We sometimes long for just one glorious day back in the romantic background of time forever gone, peaceful, less complicated days in quiet old Boca Raton on whom the Supreme Power showered natural gifts so lavishly.



Two views of the Casa Rosa.



Mrs. Harriet Gates with Imogene Alice and Harley (Buddy) Gates.

The following is from "Boca Raton, Florida: A Romance of the Past A Vision of the Future."

The Florida real estate boom reached its climax in the year 1925 and the Mizner Development Corporation made Boca Raton one of the leading promotions. The company was headed by Addison Mizner, well known architect and financed by people whose names were prominent in American industry and finance. The Company stated in its initial advertisements that the combined wealth of its stockholders represented over one-third of the entire wealth of the United States.

Boca Raton was formerly spelled with an "e" at the end, but Addison Mizner claimed it confused with the Spanish pronunciation and the "e" was dropped in 1925 at the beginning of the boom.

The first offering of Mizner Lots took place on May 1, 1925, and in the first six weeks over \$6,000,000.00 worth of lots were sold. In four months sales, after deducting cancellations, were \$16,421,625.00, and before the collapse of the boom over \$25,000,000.00 worth of lots had been sold. Addison Mizner had prepared plans for his home to be built on the island at the north end of Lake Boca Raton at a cost of \$1,000,000, but it was never commenced.

The Mizner Corporation's advertisements which appeared in local papers and in the big dailies of New York, Boston, Washington and other northern papers carried full page advertisements describing Boca Raton and the following inscription "Attach this advertisement to your contract. It becomes a part thereof". This was the basis of many damage suits against the corporation and its directors after its failure, but no damages were recovered by contract holders as a result of their suits.

Shortly after the announcement of the Mizner Development plans, Geo. W. Harvey, of Boston, purchased about 1,000 acres in the north part of Boca Raton, starting about two miles north of the City Hall and extending from the Dixie Highway to the ocean, a distance of approximately two miles. A subdivision known as Villa Rica was laid out and an elaborate development outlined. About a dozen homes and a tea room on what is now known as the Federal Highway were built, several miles of pavement and ornamental street lights were installed. A bridge over the Inland waterway furnished access to the beach. Villa Rica's plans failed with the ending of the boom and the hurricane of 1926 wrecked most of the buildings. The county bridge over the canal was moved to another location.

Boca Raton Park, King's Court, Boca Raton Heights and the Boca Raton Land Co. development were among the smaller promotions. The Boca Raton Land Co. had 144 lots on both sides of the railroad and all of these lots were sold in less than a year. The City Hall is located on one of these tracts and the Public School on another.

Croissatania, a 1,000 acre project, two miles south of Delray was started by G. Frank Croissant, of Chicago, and advertised as "Croissatania, My Masterpiece, dedicated to my Son". Aside two large concrete pillars at the entrance of the property and a short paved street no improvements were made. The large pillars, a monument to a departed subdivision, were finally torn down and the materials salvaged by other builders.

In September, 1925, excluding the Cloister Inn, building permits in Boca Raton totaled \$918,000.00. The building activity could be gauged by the freight cars on the tracks near Boca Raton filled with building materials notwithstanding the freight embargo which at that time hampered building all over the State.

In early 1926 the Mizner Corporation operated a radio station and broadcast programs each evening. The station was located at the corner

of Palmetto Park Road and what is now known as N. W. Fourth Avenue. Located among the pines and palms the radio towers looked as if the hand of man had invaded a tropical setting. The Studio was constructed in the usual manner with provision made to cover the roof and sides with palmetto fans, a truly artistic effect. The station was of 1,000 watt type operating on a wave length of 400 meters and known as "WFLA, The Voice of Tropical America".

On January 1, 1927, the Mizner Corporation claimed that their grand total of expenditures for development work, improvements and buildings were \$4,088,137.45. Of this amount nearly \$2,000,000.00 was expended to produce the following results: 3,000 acres grubbed and cleared, 42 miles of streets cleared, 32 miles of streets graded, 30 miles of streets surfaced with rock, 3 miles of streets finished with sheet asphalt, 6 miles of curb and gutter places, 180,000 square feet of sidewalks built, 7 bridges constructed, 12 miles of water mains installed and 15 wells for water supply drilled and connected.

In the spring of 1928 the Bank of Boca Raton was chartered by the State of Florida and opened its doors. At the close of business on April 21, 1928 the bank had assets of \$182,391.44, and deposits totaling \$148,847.00. This was the only statement ever given to the stockholders as the bank closed its doors in 1929 and never reopened. A New Chamber of Commerce was organized in 1928 with 60 members and a number of associate members.

The new railroad station was completed in 1928 replacing the old wooden station at the corner of Palmetto Park Road and the Dixie Highway. Until this new station was built Boca Raton had only a freight station and no provision was made for passengers.

The Boca Raton Hunt Club was started in January, 1927, with a charter membership of 60 representative citizens of this locality for the purpose of providing facilities for riding, hunting, fishing and other sports. The Club had at its disposal twenty good saddle horses and a hunting lodge.

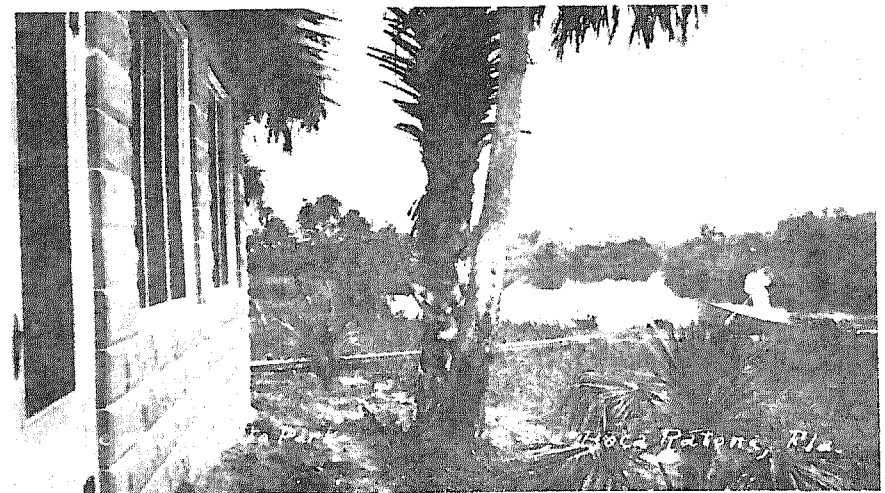
In January, 1927, appeared the Boca Raton Record, the town's first newspaper published by the Mizner Development Corporation, and several issues were printed before the failure of the Mizner Company put an end to its publication.

The Cloister Inn, on the shore of Lake Boca Raton, was completed in January 1928, and opened in February under Ritz Carlton management. Built at a cost of \$1,250,000.00 it was probably the most expensive 100 room hotel ever built.

The Cloister Inn was the social center of South Florida during the 1928 season, many prominent people from both this country and abroad were entertained here. The Camino Real, the Royal Highway from the Dixie Highway to the hotel, 160 to 220 feet in width, was completed as were two golf courses, nearly 100 homes and the Administration Building. Many local people entertained at the Administration Building, music being furnished by the Ritz-Carlton orchestra.

In January, 1926, nearly 3,500 men were working at Boca Raton to build a modern city and the payroll was in excess of \$1,000,000.00 a month.

The Mizner Corporation was declared bankrupt in 1927 and its assets offered for sale. C. H. Geist, a utility capitalist from Philadelphia, purchased the entire assets of the bankrupt corporation for a reported \$4,000,000.00 and converted the Cloister Inn into the Boca Raton Club with the addition of some 400 rooms. He rebuilt the golf course, improved the inlet and constructed jetties during the summer of 1928 to provide salt water in the lake and easy entrance to the fishing grounds. A new draw bridge was built over the inland waterway near the Boca Raton Club grounds in the summer of 1928.



The old East Coast Canal (Intra-Coastal Waterway) from the Gates house.

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